DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 129 EA 023 760

AUTHOR Wilson, Bruce; Corbett, Dick
TITLE Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative: First Steps to Restructuring. An RBS Report on the Project's First Year.
INSTITUTION Research for Better Schools, Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Oct 91
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Middle Schools; *Organizational Change; *Participative Decision Making; Program Evaluation; *School Restructuring; *State Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Maryland

ABSTRACT

First-year outcomes of a restructuring project in four Maryland middle schools are summarized in this paper, with a focus on new rules, roles, and relationships. Methodology involved interviews with 52 teachers and building administrators and 18 state department of education staff members; observation of school improvement teams; and document analysis. Resulting policy changes involved scheduling, staffing, and curriculum. The most significant changes in roles and in relationships included the use of state staff members as facilitators and increased participative decision making, respectively. An outcome was that project priorities reinforced some ideas that were already being implemented and opened up new avenues. Participants' objectives of personal skill acquisition and student improvement facilitated the potential for restructuring. A conclusion is that the development of new rules, roles, and relationships within the schools represents significant first steps in restructuring middle school education. (LMI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED342129

MIDDLE GRADE SCHOOL STATE POLICY INITIATIVE: FIRST STEPS TO RESTRUCTURING

An RBS Report on the Project's First Year

Bruce Wilson

Dick Corbett

Research for Better Schools
444 North Third Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123

October 1991

The preparation of this paper was supported by funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position of OERI, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

P. Donahoe

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EA 023 760

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EVALUATION ACTIVITIES AND DATA SOURCES 2

FIRST STEPS TO RESTRUCTURING 3

Rules 3

Roles 5

Relationships 10

Results 13

CONCLUSIONS 16

MIDDLE GRADE SCHOOL STATE POLICY INITIATIVE: FIRST STEPS TO RESTRUCTURING

An RBS Report on the Project's First Year

Four Maryland middle schools, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), and the Carnegie Corporation are collaborating to develop models of early adolescent education that (1) improve overall student and school performance, (2) coordinate comprehensive service delivery to students requiring such care, (3) stimulate collaborative development of appropriate instructional programs, (4) actively promote educational success for special student populations, and (5) institute systematic professional development opportunities for adults. In the process, there is also the intention that the schools will become school-based professional development centers. The initiative requires that local school improvement teams, community service agencies, school district central offices, and MSDE "do business with one another differently" to break the traditional educational mold that allowed a substantial segment of students to fall by the wayside. To engender this new way of doing business, participants will have to do much more than implement a new activity here or train a few teachers there. Indeed, dramatically altering the outcomes of schooling for all students means revamping the structure of schooling so that it compliments rather than contradicts the attainment of those outcomes. In short, this project seeks to "restructure" the educational system in Maryland as it pertains to middle schools, pursuing different results by establishing new patterns of rules, roles, and relationships.

This document summarizes our impressions of the changes that have taken place in the past year and casts them in restructuring terms. We use a perspective on school restructuring that emphasizes the primacy of changing the four "Rs" of school operation -- rules, roles, relationships, and results -- as the key to meaningful change, and assess the first steps to restructuring at the school, district, community, and state levels. Our discussion of the project's progress is preceded by a brief summary of our evaluation activities and data sources and is followed by a conclusion that addresses one question: Based on the first year's events, is the project on the way to a true restructuring of education, or is it likely to result in the typical "pockets of success" pattern of improvement that dominate the educational change landscape in this country?

Evaluation Activities and Data Sources

Multiple data sources were used in preparing this report. Interviews were conducted with each of the school improvement team members in all four schools. These interviews lasted from 20 to 40 minutes and were conducted with 52 teachers and building administrators. We did 18 interviews with various MSDE staff members who were involved with the project either as members of the School Improvement Council or as MSDE technical assistance team (TAT) members who worked directly with the individual schools. In addition, we observed the teams as they planned for improvements and received training about their new roles, and reviewed documents produced throughout the year that summarized the planning process. The documents included minutes of school improvement team meetings prepared by the TAT members across the four schools, school progress reports, and summaries of the results of the schools' assessment activities.

First Steps to Restructuring

Restructuring has become a popular educational buzz word, even though it has different meanings for different people. Teacher empowerment, site-based decisionmaking, alternative assessment, and community-school partnerships have all been proposed as ways to restructure. While many of these proposals are well-intentioned, they likely will meet a premature demise unless great care is taken to figure out what the implications of these changes are for the ways in which the educational system has traditionally operated. Too often promising practices disappear under the weight of historical precedent or as special one-time funding sources disappear. With this in mind, we discuss the extent to which changes started to appear throughout the educational system in Maryland during the first year of the Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative (referred to subsequently as the project) that could be taken as signs of restructuring -- that is, evidence that all levels were making changes in rules, roles, and relationships that could support efforts to improve student results. The discussion addresses these alterations at the school, district, community, and state levels.

Rules

Rules are simply expectations for behavior. Both formal and informal, they are embedded in evaluation procedures, the curriculum, scheduling practices, mission statements, resource allocations, and beliefs about how "we do things around here." The extent to which formal policy is changed to support new roles and relationships is an initial sign that a systematic effort to support reform may be underway, for two reasons. First, policy changes can remove the obstacles to new behavior. Second, and perhaps more

importantly, policy changes have considerable symbolic value as actions that signal whether stated intentions are truly meant.

While the project is still too new to expect dramatic policy changes to have already occurred, several important decisions were made that may ultimately lead to the emergence of new policies. For example, one of the schools received central office permission for an early student dismissal one day a week to enable the staff members to have time for staff development and project planning. This new scheduling practice was also discussed with parents, for whom alternative child care options were established where needed. Another school, in hopes of making the school a focal point for community interaction, established new operating hours of 7:00 AM to 11:00 PM. Still another managed to get resources allocated to wiring the whole school technologically to facilitate the coordination of services to students. There were also indications that at least a couple of schools were beginning to tackle how outside funds were funneled through the central offices to the schools. Taken individually, such events were not overly dramatic, but they offered school people the first signs that stated reform intentions were receiving support for the numerous scheduling, staffing, and curriculum alterations they were contemplating or had already started to make.

Some potentially key decisions related to other service providers in the communities were also made, especially a change in how school-based nursing costs would be handled. Schools would no longer have to fund these positions locally, a practice which in the past often meant that no full-time nurse services were available in the school. Moreover, the need to work with other service agencies so that students could receive better care and so that services could be coordinated was becoming ingrained in project participants,

which set the stage for coordination's becoming an integral part of subsequent decisions.

There was no question that some roles within MSDE were changing with respect to working with schools. Divisions were collaborating with other divisions in ways that had never occurred before and that had never had the support of key officials before. New roles need the support of policy if they are to be institutionalized over time, and the project's job arrangements were backed up by written agreements among the department's divisions. So there were rules becoming established that could maintain these new roles. Overall, the proposed reorganization of MSDE would revolve around serving schools, a promising prospect in and of itself. How such a plan would actually work remained to be seen.

An issue that ultimately will have to be addressed through policy is the staffing assignments of the MSDE technical assistance team members. These staff members who worked directly with the schools did so while fulfilling other assignments (with their corresponding accountabilities) within MSDE. In order for these role changes to become permanent (even if the responsibility becomes a local central office one), they will ultimately have to be supported by more than personal diligence on the part of the incumbents.

Roles

Roles are sets of definitions about appropriate behaviors and beliefs for people who occupy particular positions. The initial sign of changes in the ways people approach their jobs are that they behave differently than they have previously (e.g., they engage in different activities and/or alter the time devoted to current activities) and that systematic support is available

for people to learn about and try out new ways of thinking about their jobs (e.g., putting professional development opportunities into place).

In some schools, instructional role changes were underway prior to the beginning of the project. For example, teachers in a couple of schools started acting more as facilitators of cooperative learning rather than as dispensers of content knowledge, as evidenced by the amount of time teachers reported that they spent directing students versus assisting them. As far as the project is concerned, the major role alterations were reflected in the increased number of non-administrative personnel who gained a say in school decisions and in principals' relinquishing their role as the main decision-maker in the schools. However difficult this transition was, the end result seemed to have been that the role shifts were proving valuable, especially in building support for the organizational changes to follow. This redefining of the position is the type of development that will ultimately bolster the shared decisionmaking efforts at the sites.

Of additional importance was the burgeoning attention being given to staff development in some of the sites. These sessions, either conducted in the summer or during school, were designed to help all instructional people begin to be more comfortable with the ways they would need to act to carry out the kinds of instruction students would need.

We were not in the sites enough to assess whether the central offices were rethinking what sort of support roles are needed for schools. To date, there have been a couple of instances in which central office roles were discussed, and at least one instance where early indication was that the district liaison to the school would handle the work differently. Overall, those officials who traditionally had been supportive of instruction continued

to be supportive; those who traditionally treated their roles bureaucratically continued to do so.

There were a couple of developments in the summer that suggested that participants recognized the appropriateness of having external service people based within the school boundaries. One school had managed to get a health care person assigned to the school, while another obtained the appointment of a social service worker within the school, paid by an external agency.

One of the most noteworthy developments during the first year of the project was the appearance of state staff members in a facilitating role. As each school team struggled with the change process in their schools, it was clear that their progress was substantially aided by the willingness of state staff members to play a loosely defined, broadly responsive, helping role in working with the improvement teams.

What it meant to be facilitative varied from school to school and even, from time to time, within a school. Indeed, there were at least six functions associated with the facilitator role. First, there was the function of helping school staff learn to work as a team. The first year of the project was devoted to establishing a systematic way of going about the business of improvement. While each of the schools proceeded along a slightly different path in a way that fit their particular circumstances, the overall general process was the same for all four. The importance of the state presence was in helping to tailor that process to a particular school and in reinforcing local staff as they worked together. There was strong consensus among local educators that the school teams would not have made nearly the progress they had without some outside help. The effect of carefully building the team capacity in the schools was summarized best by one of the facilitators who

commented: "If all of us dropped dead tomorrow, a process and plan is in place and the schools could carry on; a road map is in place."

A second important function played by the facilitators was to link the teams from the four schools together, thus reducing the feelings of isolation. By communicating what was happening in the other schools, reinforcement was offered. As one teacher commented: "We now realize that everyone is not alone -- Oh! You feel that way, too."

Third, state staff handled many of the clerical tasks associated with assessing, prioritizing, and handling all of the data the schools gathered to guide implementing their improvement ideas. School staff tended to not have the time to organize this information in a way that was useful for decision-making. The MSDE technical assistance team members, thus, made it possible for more of the school people's time to go to actually making decisions. The technical assistance teams also dealt with burdensome minutes and other documentation requirements, further freeing the improvement team to devote more time and energy to substantive issues.

Fourth, the technical expertise of the facilitators was another plus, according to the school people. This expertise varied from extensive experience in working with data, to having varied connections with other service agencies, to knowledge of new curricular and instructional techniques. One teacher eloquently summarized the value of this expertise: "It has been wonderful to get their input and knowledge from their other experiences ... They help us see things we wouldn't have seen." By combining diverse technical skills with a knowledge of what was happening in the other schools in the project (as well as throughout the state) the range of possibilities to which school teams were exposed was greatly enhanced. "They present us with the opportunity to experiment," was one team member's conclusion.

Fifth, facilitators spent considerable time working with and for the school teams, in many cases going well beyond what was required. By the end of the year many of the school staff considered their facilitators as part of the regular staff, "I now view those people as an every day occurrence in the school." This frequent interaction allowed facilitators to interpret state actions for locals in a way that was meaningful: "They helped bring the governmental perspective". While there was not necessarily agreement with that perspective, at least local educators became more knowledgeable about and understanding of why that perspective existed.

Finally, school staff repeatedly mentioned the supportive way in which the state approached this role. This was in contrast to the more directive way much of the work by the state had been accomplished previously: "They had to live down the MSDE reputation." Central to that supportiveness was the willingness to listen without passing judgment. This was captured by the following views: "They set before us ideas without telling us how to do it," and "They let us come to our own conclusions. They were never judgmental."

This new role did not just happen. In all four sites it emerged through a gradual process, with both the school and state staff learning to adjust and adapt. As one state staff member commented: "There has been a gradual change in our role. We have become more integrated ... We have become more a resource, less a leader. We have let the school take over."

Clearly some roles were changing within MSDE. At this point, we cannot say whether these changes will be temporary or permanent; more corresponding changes in department policy and decisionmaking will need to be forthcoming if this new way of working with schools is to become institutionalized.

Relationships

Relationships are defined by who interacts with whom and by who influences whom. The decisionmaking arena is usually the best one to see what kind of relationships exist in an organization; and the events in the schools proved to be no different.

The most dramatic development in the schools over the year was the extent to which teachers, counselors, and support staff were incorporated into the decisionmaking loop. People uncharacteristically interacted with people outside their personal bailiwicks, and the evidence suggests that these people were just not offering input to the administrators but rather were actually determining the course of events. Quite simply, the team members and the administrators were relating to one another entirely differently than before.

At the beginning of the year much of the burden for making decisions, or even discussing ways to approach a particular issue, fell under the purview of the principal. Teachers often felt removed from the process. However, with the advent of the school improvement teams much of that changed dramatically. Rather than one person taking responsibility, decisionmaking was more likely to be shared. One teacher's analysis was that, "The problem in schools is the need to build an team spirit, a sense of collegiality. The school improvement team helps with that process. It gets everyone dancing, not just a few." As with all change, this new process of decisionmaking was not without its growing pains during the year, but teachers in all four schools were generally positive about the net effects and enthusiastic about its potential for the future.

What was most striking when teachers talked about the changes in decisionmaking in the schools was their analysis of the effects on the school. First, with more people involved teachers suggested that the decision process

was more open: "There is now a public forum [for debating improvements] where before it went on behind the scenes." Underlying this quote was the feeling that principals used to make most of the decisions and then simply would announce what others would have to do to carry them out. Now there is more reliance on the involvement of others. It was common in conversations across all four schools for staff to talk about the "team" making decisions, there was much more of a sense of "we" rather than the isolated "I".

Related to that collective sense of purpose was a greater willingness to work a little bit harder. One of the more cynical teachers about the prospects for the project, when reflecting about why he/she was even involved, said: "I want to be involved. I care about the school. I see this as a potentially important vehicle for change." The argument presented by several teachers was that by having a hand in developing the plan, there was more eagerness to put out the extra effort.

Working together as a group also taught them the art of compromise and how to adjust to the disagreements common to frank discussions. One participant suggested: "Look at the proposal that went to the state. There is a big difference from when we started. There is a coming together ... It's like a marriage; there is more give and take." At the same time there was recognition that working together afforded them the opportunity to be exposed to different insights, "better to see the gaps that are missing", and generally be exposed to new ideas, approaches, and people.

"Ownership" was another common descriptor used by teachers to capture the effects of more shared decisionmaking. Staff members were no longer going through the motions. Rather, they felt that their involvement had meaning: "Committees now actually mean something." Associated with ownership was a perceived increase in professional respect. That respect was seen as a two-

way street. On the one hand, the principals in the four schools were more likely to recognize, acknowledge, and be an advocate for the efforts of teachers; and, on the other hand, the teachers better understood the actions and goals of the principals. There was even some discussion about teachers becoming more "professional" and that all of this effort was producing a clearer sense of direction.

A final outcome of this increased involvement in decisionmaking was the view that teachers were working together more closely and there was much better communication, with that communication even moving beyond the building, as witnessed by this assessment: "One jewel of this project has been the improved relationships. There is better inter- and intra-departmental communication. We have gotten to know the principal and there has been increased networking of the teachers with the community and other professional resources." While none of the informants used the term "collegiality", from our vantage point, the groundwork for enhanced collegiality was established. Moreover, shared decisionmaking should prove of value to the stability of the projects in these four schools because the natural comings and goings of teachers and administrators ought to be much less disruptive than in the case of many school improvement initiatives that remain in the hands of a couple of individuals.

Discussions of changes in school-central office relationships had taken place by the end of the year. While these discussions were labeled as beneficial, there was no evidence yet that the two entities would interact differently or have a different distribution of power between them.

Changes in relationships with community service agencies were apparent in that school people and personnel from these agencies were starting to talk

with one another. The previously mentioned role assignments were the first products of this new interaction.

Undeniably, the MSDE technical assistance team members had a different relationship with the schools than they had ever had before. They visited the schools more, talked with a wider variety of people, and offered more service. The relationship had become one of assistance rather than enforcement, a welcomed and very significant change -- according to school people -- from past interactions. The benefits of this sort of relationship were detailed above.

MSDE staff members claimed that they were on the verge of relating to their colleagues within the department differently as well. While there were strong indications that different people were talking to one another, both within and across divisions, it appeared that existing lines of authority were still holding sway.

Results

Ultimately the payoff of the project has to be with students, and it has to be with all students becoming successful learners. When one speaks of the results of restructuring, students are the touchstone. However, the reform process is complex, and it is critical to keep intermediate system results in mind as a tool to help adjust the process. So, in the first year of a restructuring effort it is probably most important to ask two questions with respect to results: (1) Are participants beginning to identify what they want to have happen differently with students; and (2) Are the adults beginning to behave in such a way that will facilitate creating schools in which those student results are attainable?

All four schools conducted the Middle Learning Years Needs Assessment Survey (developed at MSDE) to help the teams identify priorities to address. The prominence that the results played in goal decisions varied considerably -- and for a variety of reasons, ranging from (1) wanting to take full advantage of a rare opportunity to tap the perceptions of a lot of people about the school, to (2) being uncomfortable with the survey instruments and thus not wanting to rely on them too much, to (3) having conducted a similar activity very recently, thereby making the current surveys redundant. However, even without the formal instruments, none of the schools lacked sources of input into the issue of what focus the project should adopt. And, drawing on all the information available to them, the schools all had a sense of direction and team commitment to what they wanted to accomplish by the end of the first year.

Generally staff members suggested that their motivation for becoming a part of the project was to see something different happen with students. Interestingly, this "something different" tended to be defined in nonacademic terms. For example, in one school "something different" was "enhanced personal development;" in another it was "to get students to believe in themselves;" in a third, it was "to enable students to learn to live with others;" and in a fourth, it was "to see students beginning to help one another." So, underneath whatever objectives school people had for the activities at their sites lay a common concern with affective outcomes as essential ingredients of an appropriate education for middle school students.

The project itself brought with it a set of expectations that became meshed with directions the schools were already beginning to take, e.g., the Carnegie emphasis on interagency coordination, the changes recommended by the middle schools restructuring task force, and the standards set by the Maryland

School Performance Program. Thus, the project priorities served to reinforce and to validate some ideas the schools were already putting into place, while at the same time these foci opened up new avenues for the schools to begin to follow. Overall, by the end of the summer, the school teams seemed to be weaving the various improvement strands into a whole, so that the project was occupying a central place in the schools' progress as opposed to being an isolated, stand-alone initiative.

Significant from a restructuring standpoint is (1) who identifies the student results to be achieved and (2) what those results should be. At the end of the first year, most team members were confident that they were indeed in charge of their own fates: "We make decisions about what we feel is needed" was the consensus view among school people, with the mix of input sources used varying across the sites. Our bias is that there is no need for anyone to expend all the energy that substantive change requires if they are not serious about enabling all students to become successful learners, with successful learning being more broadly defined than just increases on the narrow, traditional set of indicators commonly used such as test scores, attendance rates, and the like. The school people in the project are looking beyond content acquisition to caring kinds of skills as valid student outcomes, so there is the potential for restructuring to be warranted with that broader view of student outcomes. The coming year should tell clearly if the project is truly reaching for student outcomes never before achieved or simply trying to do better with knowledge acquisition. At the moment, the schools -- in conjunction with MSDE -- have made considerable strides toward developing new ways of making decisions and toward considering very significant issues related to middle school education.

Significant for the shorter term was the belief of all four school teams that they were headed in a locally relevant and determined direction. What they seemed most committed to was a process for jointly determining what they should work on and that this process would produce viable and effective avenues for improvement.

Conclusions

Restructuring is much more than another label for school improvement. While school improvement can accomodate piecemeal programmatic changes, restructuring implicates an entire system of education in the redesign of schooling in the pursuit of dramatically different results for students than are presently being attained. As stated in our evaluation proposal, restructuring is the altering of a school's and system's rules, roles, relationships, and results.

The key issue at this point of the project, then, is to what extent does it look like the project is actually yielding restructuring-like phenomena. That is, are the schools and MSDE just tinkering some more with a pretty much traditional approach to education or are they coming up with "a whole new way of doing business differently," as a number of MSDE officials hoped? The real answer to this question has to wait for the implementation of identified changes to be in place for a considerable amount of time, but a reasonable interim approach is to briefly run through how, if at all, existing rules, roles, relationships, and results were affected at the school, local system, community, and state levels. What such an analysis shows is that in the first year, exciting new roles and relationships within the schools and between the schools and MSDE begin to develop. And, in our opinion, these developments represent significant first steps in restructuring middle school education.